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Augustana College

Marching Straight in Sweden

The Parade of A Queer Swedish Utopia or False Hope?

Ainslie Lounsbury

WGSS 350: Queer Theories

Dr. Kiki Kosnick

10 December 2019

Within the never-ending wheel of society, two institutions largely dominate nearly every modern nation: the government and the corporate engine. These groups choose to use their power in many different ways. Some use this power only as a money-making tool, some use it to promote positive growth in society (both socially and for the health of the world), and many choose to do almost nothing with the power they wield. Regardless of how these groups utilize their power, their grip on society is so strong, they can completely change the culture surrounding particular ideas. The country of Sweden best exemplifies the powers of the government and corporations in allowing particular groups into what queer theorist Gayle Rubin refers to as the “charmed inner circle”¹.

Sweden has long been a country that is ahead of the times; homosexual relationships were legalized as early as 1944, a prime example of Sweden’s for modernity in Scandinavian society. Most Swedes pride themselves on this fact; however, is this because they truly believe in it, or is it because the government and the commercial advertising worlds have done an effective job of assimilating these groups into society? Militaries across the globe are highly politicized. Not only does the military reflect the beliefs of the government to their citizens, it also is a form of expressing Sweden’s beliefs to the world. The support that is provided by Swedish advertising helps positive ideas about the LGBTQ+ community to migrate more rapidly. By analyzing Gayle Rubin’s concept of the “charmed inner circle” from the work “Thinking Sex” and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s ideas presented in “Sex in Public”, it is shown that Sweden is a country that works to undo toxic systems, but also presents homonormative ideas as well. In Sweden, the national spirit and self-image of being a human rights pioneer for both the commercial

¹ The “charmed inner circle” refers to what is viewed as socially acceptable within society. For example, heterosexual, white, and middle class couples are more assimilated, while homosexual, lower class, couples of color are nearly shunned from society. See “Thinking Sex” by Gayle Rubin.

advertising world and the Swedish government directly affect one another in terms of furthering the work of LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance across the country.

Unlike queer theory research conducted in the United States, Sweden does not have as expansive of an amount of research that has been completed within the country. Despite this, Sweden has been at the forefront of protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ people more than almost any other country in the world. Advertisers for the government and other commercial products in Sweden have worked to make LGBTQ+ merchandise more mainstream; therefore, the LGBTQ+ community has been more easily accepted than in other nations. The government has particularly focused on creating advertisements for the LGBTQ+ community. They are both objective and artistic: all of them use visual appeal and literary devices to grab the attention of the Swedish population. Despite being put out by the government, these advertisements have had a tremendous impact on the visibility of the queer community.

While the government is disliked and not trusted in many nations, Sweden has a more positive bond with their citizens. According to the official Swedish fact source run by the Swedish Institute, “Swedes generally have a high level of confidence in government authorities. This trust grows out of a long history of public transparency, egalitarian politics and laws and institutions that protect the rights of individuals. The ombudsman system – public agencies that represent the interest of individuals – has been in effect since 1809” (sweden.se). With a stronger connection between the public and the government, the culture surrounding the rights of others is stronger compared to countries that do not have a positive relationship between the citizens and its leadership. The ombudsman system creates a sense of accountability and respect for protecting the rights of marginalized groups. All people in Sweden have the opportunity to create

an ombudsman for any group within the country—the first ombudsman for LGBTQ+ people in Sweden was established in 1999, which provided more opportunities for the community to fight for their rights.

Swedish tourist websites also work tirelessly to establish a pro-LGBTQ+ stance in the country. A simple Google search brings up countless positive headlines such as “Gay Friendly Sweden” on sweden.se and “Inspiration for gay and lesbian travellers to Sweden” from visitsweden.lgbt. This public advertising campaign positively impacts the view people have of the LGBTQ+ community, but it also positively impacts the global perception of Sweden. While both the Swedish government and tourist websites are supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, it is important to mention that while they are extremely supportive of these groups, the same websites and advertisements are biased. Both groups want tourists from across the globe to come to Sweden; if they were not supportive or were outwardly negative towards the LGBTQ+ community, Sweden would likely become a much less popular destination. However, they have used support for the LGBTQ+ community to their advantage—Sweden has the largest pride celebrations in all of Scandinavia, and one of the largest celebrations in the world.

The advertisements that have been created by the Swedish government and tourist websites have been instrumental in creating a national culture of support and normalization of the LGBTQ+ community. Within any culture, there is an idea of what is supposed to be “pure” and what the “perfect life” is. According to Gayle Rubin’s “charmed inner circle” theory from “Thinking Sex”, “sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. . . . Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial” (152). Most cultures define “good”

sexuality as Rubin defined it, which has created a world where anything outside of the “good” is disgusting and impure. However, this inner circle is constantly shifting, and the lines that define these limits often blur. When national governments and advertisers work against these ideas by showing people who are outside of “normal” in a context that is considered “good” (such as in the military or with their family), as the Swedish military and government has been doing for many years. A modern society recognizes that humanity is one large circle without “inner” and “outer” sections, and Sweden is working on addressing this concept head on.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “ Sex in Public” also connects with Swedish LGBTQ+ advertising. Often, heteronormativity is “the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities” (Berlant & Warner, 549). When advertisements portray the perfect life as a heterosexual, white, married couple with a son and daughter, the national culture becomes about striving for this perfect image that has been etched into our minds. However, Sweden is working to reverse these images by portraying the LGBTQ+ community in a positive light by supporting them and portraying them in positions of strength and social significance (such as through military or Absolut Vodka advertisements). Sweden is so dedicated to undoing this idea of “purity”, the public has spun the ideas into an “us vs. them” mentality. Professor Katharina Kehl from University of Lund, in Lund, Sweden, describes this polarization as

“the LGBT- friendly culture that defines Sweden and ‘Swedishness’ (it is even enshrined in law) against a diffuse intolerant and homophobic ‘they’ disrespecting both Swedish

culture and Swedish law. . . . It is a well-established narrative both within and outside of Sweden, making it easy to recognise and easy to identify with, even for people who would not consider themselves supporters of the political right” (Kehl).

Once again, the ideas presented are that the LGBTQ+ community is made more public, which helps make them more acceptable in the eyes of the public. In doing so, the “inner circle” expands to include the community more. Swedish advertising has largely been successful in recognizing the intercultural belief that defines Sweden as progressive, modern, and accepting; this fact has made the advertisements far more effective. This “us vs. them” philosophy contained within these advertisements may meet some initial backlash, they have slowly worked towards normalizing the LGBTQ+ community and inviting them into the “inner circle”.

The Swedish military has been one of the primary advertising forces in support of the LGBTQ+ community through its simple yet symbolic messaging. The first pride campaign was launched in 2015, featuring a person in camouflage with their face and the background all painted the same color. The person has a rainbow flag patch on their right sleeve, with the message “Some things you should not need to camouflage”. See Figure 1, below (www.outtraveler.com/pride/2015/07/22/swedish-army-launches-pride-campaign):



Figure 1

(www.outtraveler.com/pride/2015/07/22/swedish-army-launches-pride-campaign)

There are multiple messages being portrayed through this advertisement; the person featured in the advertisement has an androgynous appearance, allowing cisgender, transgender, and agender people to be represented in the advertisement. Choosing to keep the person ambiguous allows them to be any gender or sexual orientation, which allows everyone to connect with the advertisement. Additionally, because the rest of the image utilizes a camouflage pattern, the rainbow pride flag is able to stand out more than it would otherwise, an artistic choice that draws the eye of the viewer. This contrast emphasizes the idea that being part of the LGBTQ+ community is not a part of you that needs to be hidden away. Most importantly, the advertisement uses bold, firm statements to make their point clear. The strongest statement reads: “In the armed forces, we treat each other with respect and see other people’s differences as a

strength. We are an inclusive organization where everyone serving and contributing will feel welcomed and respected.” Instead of saying “all people should be treated with respect” or “we try to be inclusive”, saying “we treat each other with respect” and “we are an inclusive organization” clearly establishes the mission of the advertisement. When certain companies use less confident statements, people are less likely to want to believe them. However, the Swedish military uses the bold, assertive syntax to address the LGBTQ+ community in a positive and respectful manner.

In 2017, the Swedish military once again launched a pride campaign for the LGBTQ+ community featuring black military boots with rainbow shoelaces. Although visually simpler than the previous advertisement, there are still multiple important points to discuss. See Figure 2 (www.welovead.com/cn/works/details/66cwgoshxh):



Figure 2 (www.welovead.com/cn/works/details/66cwgoshxh)

Once again, the background choice lends to emphasizing the rainbow imagery within the advertisement. Shoes, particularly military shoes, usually symbolize hard work and strength in the art and literary spheres. By picturing the rainbow flag on the military shoes, these same ideas

are transferred to the LGBTQ+ community: that they are strong and continue to work hard to fight for their rights. The Swedish military continues to use direct statements, as translated on politicaldresser.com: “We are prepared to go as far as necessary. Your right to live how you wish, as you want and with who you want is our duty to defend. And we are prepared to give everything to do that.” Words such as “prepared”, “necessary”, and “duty” establish a tone of importance and respect. Without them, the advertisement would not be nearly as effective in establishing a positive core national culture.

The most recent military pride advertisement from 2018 has the brightest, most detailed imagery of the three images analyzed. The advertisement was created to celebrate Sweden hosting EuroPride. See Figure 3

(campaignsoftheworld.com/print/swedish-armed-forces-europride/):



Figure 3 (campaignsoftheworld.com/print/swedish-armed-forces-europride/)

Rainbow symbolism is also used in this military advertisement, and is very similar to the previous two. The clever play on words of “we don’t always march straight” adds some humor to draw audience members in, but also uses similar bold statements utilized in the previous advertisements. Ultimately, being so open to the LGBTQ+ community has benefited many, but has also drawn critique: in the article “A country to fall in love with/in”: gender and sexuality in Swedish Armed Forces’ marketing campaigns by Sanna Strand and Katharina Kehl,

“In other advertisements, the SAF suggests that what “makes Sweden, Sweden” is “democracy, freedom and the right to love whoever you want” or ask potential recruits if they “also want to defend extreme values?” . . . Sweden is performed as an exceptionally and “extremely” progressive, modern, tolerant and inclusive nation/state whose citizens hold values, rights and freedoms currently under threat from distant and dangerous Others. More precisely, it is *because* of its progressiveness that Sweden is threatened and thus must be defended.”

So while the advertisements described above have been positive and beneficial for the public image and “purity” of the LGBTQ+ community, it was also intended to draw recruits in so that the military could become larger and stronger. It is a company, after all. Additionally, there has been much controversy surrounding whether the LGBTQ+ community should be representing such violent organizations, particularly the military.

Despite having a lot of positive connotations, these images and advertisements can also be read as perpetuating homonormativity. Homonormativity creates stereotypes for what people from the LGBTQ+ community should be like or what they should have, but they are usually extremely misguided. Images such as the advertisements that the Swedish military have

produced could be considered homonormative, but they also work as subversive systems of power. Depicting the LGBTQ+ community as members of the military, which is often considered a position of high respect and power, works to reverse the idea that only cisgender, heterosexual, white males can be in the same positions.

Although the community has garnered more acceptance in Sweden as a result of LGBTQ+ positive advertisements redefining the core national culture around what is “pure” and accepted, the advertisements still call into question whether they are truly working to subvert systems of power. Absolut Vodka, a Swedish liquor company, has also been fighting for LGBTQ+ rights in Sweden, but it can be said that the way the company goes about it is pushing towards the idea that being LGBTQ+ can become normalized and mainstreamed. Alcohol is seen by some as the pinnacle of the social realm and the center of many social events. Absolut Vodka wants people to buy their drinks, so they market it to make it more appealing. See Figure 4 (<https://www.drinksandco.co.uk/vodka/absolut-colors>):



Figure 4 (<https://www.drinksandco.co.uk/vodka/absolut-colors>)

Returning to the idea that the Swedish government and tourist websites are constantly trying to garner positive attention and draw tourists in, Absolut Vodka is committed to developing positive attention for Sweden. The company is proud to display “Country of Sweden”, continuing the Swedish national self-image of being human rights advocates. They also use “mission statements” with “We are” types of sentences to be bold and proud, rather than full of shame. However, Absolut Vodka’s advertisements also have plenty to critique. Absolut Vodka also utilizes rainbow capitalism² through advertising and products. Rainbow capitalism is a marketing technique meant to target the LGBTQ+ community by claiming to be supportive with “limited edition” items with rainbows painted on them. While that is the idea, it often appeals to the mainstream general public because “rainbows are pretty and I can look supportive without actually doing anything!” rather than a genuine effort to improve conditions for these oppressed groups. Often, it becomes more about money and consumerism than actual support for the LGBTQ+ community. Absolut also claims how long they have been supporting the community: it may be intending to be supportive, but it also comes across as trying to get consumers to purchase their alcohol because of the rainbow flag and how long they have been supportive. Although it is positive support for the LGBTQ+ community, it feels empty because of the use of words and images such as “limited edition” rainbow packaging, which makes the community seem rare and nowhere to be found. However, the LGBTQ+ community is everywhere - and should be celebrated year round and in every facet of life!

² Rainbow capitalism, also known as rainbow advertising or rainbow washing, can be very problematic. From Wired’s “The Problem With the ‘Rainbow-Washing’ of LGBTQ+ Pride”: “Rainbow-washing allows people, governments, and corporations that don’t do tangible work to support LGBTQ+ communities at any other time during the year to slap a rainbow on top of something in the month of June and call it allyship.” Read more at <https://www.wired.com/story/lgbtq-pride-consumerism/>.

Sweden has always been one of the global pioneers for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, both through public policy and through advertisements from various institutions and organizations. Through art and positive advertising for the community, people and ideas about the queer community have migrated from “modern” Sweden to other countries across the globe. Systems such as the ombudsman system helps to create accountability in conjunction with the pride surrounding the national self-image of campaigning for equality everywhere. The advertisements create a sense of “purity” for what equality can be; not only has this actively improved the public image, but the Swedish government and the general public has also been more willing to take policy action for the LGBTQ+ community because of the work these companies and organizations have done. Although a company’s true intentions becoming murky when analyzing rainbow advertising and limited edition marketing through the lenses of Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “Sex in Public”, they have ultimately been a positive force when working towards breaking down the ideas of what the “perfect” and “pure” life is meant to be.

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